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The Hidden Hand – A Brief History of the CIA

By Jim Miles

October 18, 2014

*This indeed is a brief history of the CIA, a topic that could command volumes of information encompassing much if not all of post World War II history. **Richard Immerman's The Hidden Hand – A Brief History of the CIA** is essentially a political precis of this important U.S. institution. By necessity to its conciseness, it does not go into depth on the various personalities that influence the CIA, nor does it delve into the details of any historical element. It names names, important dates, important events and keeps them within the well defined context of his frame of reference. That reference is the internal political battles over whether the CIA is – or wants to be – essentially an intelligence gathering, analysis establishment, or a covert operations unit applying physical force of some kind in the field.*

From the outset, Immerman indicates that “In a drastic departure from the intent of the CIA’s designers, the growth of the covert operations in frequency and complexity diverted both resources and commitment from the agency’s core mission of collecting, analyzing, and distributing intelligence.” To make matters worse, even with intelligent estimates of whatever degree of accuracy, “correct assessments do not lead to correct predictions of behavior.”

The importance of the latter rises from the predisposed beliefs of the politicians who received the information and who were deciding on whether it was ‘actionable’. While describing Eisenhower’s impact on the CIA, “his perspective and predisposition” were influential in

deciding the who and how of operations, choosing John Dulles for director and General James Doolittle for an ad hoc Committee to assist with covert operations. While considering Cuba later, the deputy director, “flushed with the pride and arrogance produced by the success in Iran and Guatemala,” was the “most fundamental cause of the debacle.”

The descriptions of the influence of personal perspectives goes on. Immerman discusses the “predispositions” of those involved, the “bureaucracy” trying to protect conflicting interests, and with ambiguous evidence, “analysts interpreted it to corroborate their assumptions and expectations.” The latter phrase criticized the CIA’s work with the 1963 October Cuban missile crisis, under the direction of Dulles McCone, “a conservative, fiercely anti-Soviet Republican” who “relied more on his gut instincts” than on the analysts’ assessments.

Another aspect of personal influences, again referring to McCone, was that “he wanted to tell his “first customer” what he thought Kennedy wanted to hear.” Immerman notes that this was not unusual for Washington, and revisits the idea with George Tenet (under President Clinton) who was “predisposed to currying favor by telling people what they wanted to hear.”

This history of internal conflict – between intelligence gathering and covert actions, assessment and analysis against political predispositions – carries throughout this short history. An aspect not examined by Immerman is the predisposition of anyone working for the CIA having such a strong pro U.S. bias in the first place, quite naturally by the nature of the institution in a country that proclaims its self-righteousness every day. It is understandably not questioned in the book, as the book is vetted by the CIA itself.

The problem arising is simply as expressed by the author in his criticism of “perspectives and predispositions”. The best intelligence officers would be pathologically neutral, without preconceived thoughts, able to gather all intelligence that related to the topic at hand and be able to analyze its various ramifications. As it stands, Immerman is affected by this as well, being a part of the very institution he is criticizing, making it a rather sanitary history, one acceptable to the CIA institution itself, but also to the greater audience that might read the book.

I first wondered about this when he writes about “success in Iran and Guatemala” as noted above. Does he truly believe that these coups were successes, completely or partially? Are they successes within their particular limited time frame and geopolitical constructs without consideration of the long term consequences, which were quite disastrous, especially for the citizens of the countries involved? Or is this a paraphrased comment taken from a citation given at the end of his paragraph?

Immerman’s writing, as the work progresses into Twenty-first Century events, becomes a bit more problematical, perhaps due to the much shorter perspective on events, and again, the old vetting process on what might be acceptable to write. The events of 9/11 are taken for granted, without discussion as to the validity of the official assessment – a complete cover-up from what information I have been exposed to – and that is combined with acceptance of Bin Laden as being the ultimate evil dude in the whole setup. Within hours, bin Laden was the guilty culprit, the evidence was being destroyed, and the government resisted attempts at an investigation.

The CIA became the scapegoat for the incident, deflecting criticism away from the longstanding tenure of the neocons mentioned in the work (Wolfowitz, Pipes, Wohlstetter, Rumsfeld, Scowcroft, Cheney, Feith, Nitze, et al) who had operated under Reagan and then been reborn under G. W. Bush., all with their desire for a “new Pearl Harbor”. These are the same people who created the momentum for the invasion of Iraq, an event which highlights the struggle between administrators predispositions and the actual intelligence that had been gathered by the CIA.

The book closes with a discussion on terrorism and drones, a valid discussion in reference to the CIA. What is missing from a more modern perspective are discussions of the Arab Spring, the various color revolutions, and the incremental creep towards containing and/or dismantling Russia, all very significant in consideration of today’s current events, all influenced by U.S. CIA covert and overt operations.

That is a bit of an aside to criticizing the book, but it highlights the limitations of such a “brief” history in not being able to explore more ideas and present arguments about what are some common publicly held – and differing – positions on events. It is unfortunately Immerman’s very last statement in the book that for someone living outside the “Empire for Liberty” (1) draws big attention to his own bias and preconception of the U.S. as being the indispensable nation, the world leaders, the “shining light upon a hill”;

...in a globalized world of fluid boundaries punctuated by continuing and emerging threats and a cacophony of armed insurrectionists about which the United States knows very little, it would be the CIA that best serves the national and, indeed, the world’s interest.

Whoa! This implies that the world’s best interests are those of the U.S.; that the CIA with all its predispositions and preconceptions could actually improve the situation; which ignores the fact that the CIA, among other U.S. institutions, helped create many if not most of these “armed insurrectionists” in the first place. It makes one wonder why they do not know very much about them, as they were convenient at the time, but then allowed to disappear from the radar so that in the future they could become another valuable convenient evil ‘other’ that the U.S. and the CIA had to do battle with.

So what are the continuing and emerging threats? Russia is obviously one of the evil ‘others’ a convenient “continuing” geopolitical threat to arouse the nation towards more global hegemony. ISIS is an “emerging” threat, created by all the other havoc introduced into the Middle East by its covert and overt actions there, more blowback than emerging.

In short, apart from many other examples I could draw on, as many others have, the U.S. and the CIA are decidedly not the people that have the best interests of the world in mind. It is still an empire with empirical demands, decaying and lashing out in its anguish at losing power and influence in the world. Thus a reasonably well written work self destructs in the last paragraph.

Note (1):

Empire for Liberty. Richard H. Immerman. Princeton University Press, 2010. Review here:http://www.palestinechronicle.com/old/view_article_details.php?id=16340

“ From his clearly developed thesis and his strong precis of the important players of his choice, the characterizations that follow provide a lively, entertaining, and informative package on the development of the U.S. empire of liberty.”

But as with the contemporary work, modern history is a problem:

“As with all histories, the writing creates a time lapse that makes interpretation of current events difficult if not impossible. Immerman ends his work castigating the Bush administration as “detention, torture, and rendition were systematic, orchestrated by the [CIA] with the Bush administration’s explicit approval.” Following that he looks forward to the ‘audacity of hope’ and ‘change’ that have proven to be meaningless under Obama’s leadership. While recognizing that Obama has not followed through on his rhetorical promises, he indicates that the future “may well incorporate less empire and more liberty.”

Looks like more empire, more violent empire, and much less liberty, at home and abroad.